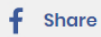




Other Religions ► Alternative Religions

Ouroboros



Share



Flip



Mail



Print

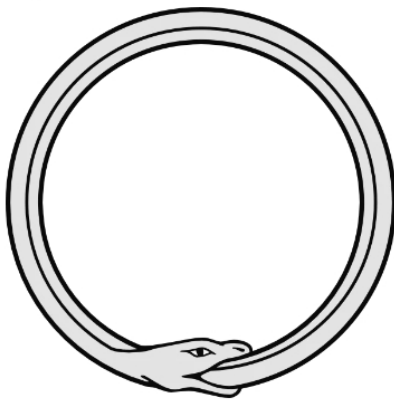
By [Catherine Beyer](#)

Updated on March 08, 2017

01

of 08

Ouroboros



Mohamed Ibrahim, public domain

The ouroboros is a snake or dragon (often described as a "serpent") eating its own tail. It is present in a variety of different cultures, going back as far as the ancient Egyptians. The word itself is Greek, meaning "tail-eater." Today, it is most associated with [Gnosticism](#), [alchemy](#), and Hermeticism.

Meanings

There are a wide variety of interpretations of the ouroboros. It is commonly associated with regeneration, reincarnation, and immortality, as well as with the cycles of time and life in general. After all, the serpent is being created through its own destruction.

The ouroboros often commonly represents totality and completion. It is a complete system in and of itself, without the need of any external force.

Finally, it may also represent the result of the collision of opposites, of two opposing halves making a united whole. This idea might be reinforced with the use of two serpents instead of one or in coloring the serpent both black and white.

02

of 08

Ouroboros from the Papyrus of Dama Heroub



The papyrus of Dama Heroub contains one of the oldest depictions of an ouroboros – a serpent eating its own tail. It dates from the 21st dynasty in Egypt, making it more than 3000 years old.

Here it may represent the zodiac: the



21st Dynasty, Egypt, 11th Century BCE.

Here it may represent the seasons, the unending cycle of constellations through the night sky.

It should be noted, however, that symbols of the sun in Egypt are generally composed of a red-orange

disk surrounded by the body of the snake with a uraeus – an upright cobra's head – at the bottom. It represents the god Mehen protecting the sun god through its hazardous nightly journey. The uraeus, however, does not bite its own tail.

Egyptian culture also contains what may be the world's oldest reference to an ouroboros. Inside the pyramid of Unas, it is written: "A serpent is entwined by a serpent...the male serpent is bitten by the female serpent, the female serpent is bitten by the male serpent, Heaven is enchanted, earth is enchanted, the male behind mankind is enchanted." There is, however, no illustration to go along with this text.

03 Greco-Egyptian Ouroboros Image

of 08



From the *Chrysopoeia of Cleopatra*. From the *Chrysopoeia of Cleopatra*

This particular depiction of the ouroboros comes from the *Chrysopoeia* ("Gold-Making") of Cleopatra, an alchemical text from about 2000 years ago. Originating in Egypt and written in Greek, the document is clearly Hellenistic, so the image is sometimes referred to as the Greco-Egyptian ouroboros or the Alexandrian ouroboros. (Egypt fell under Greek cultural influence after an invasion by Alexander the Great.) The use of the name "Cleopatra" here does not refer to the famous female pharaoh of the same name.

The words within the ouroboros are generally translated as "All is one," or occasionally as "One is the All." Both phrases are generally taken to mean the same thing.

Unlike many an ouroboros, this particular serpent is composed of two colors. Its top part is black while the bottom half is white. This is often equated to the Gnostic notion of duality, and to the concept of opposing forces coming together to create a complete whole. This position is similar to that represented by the Taoist yin-yang symbol.

04 Eliphas Levi's Great Symbol of Solomon

of 08



This illustration comes from Eliphas Levi's 19th-century publication *Transcendental Magic*. In it, he describes it as: "The great Symbol of Solomon. The Double Triangle of Solomon, represented by the two Ancients of the Kabalah; the Macroprosopus and the Microprosopus; the God of Light and



From his Book *Transcendental Magic*. Eliphas Levi

microprosopus, the God of Light and the God of Reflections; of mercy and vengeance; the white Jehovah and the black Jehovah."

There's a lot of symbolism packed into that explanation. The Macroprosopus and Microprosopus translate to "creator of the greater world" and "creator of the little world."

This, in turn, can refer to a number of things as well, such as the spiritual world and the physical world, or the universe and the human being, known as the macrocosm and the microcosm. Levi himself states that the Microprosopus is the magician himself as he shapes his own world.

As Above, So Below

The symbolism is also frequently equated to the Hermetic maxim "As above, so below." That is to say, things that happen in the spiritual realm, in the microcosm, reflect throughout the physical realm and the macrocosm. Here that idea is emphasized by the literal depiction of reflection: the dark Jehovah is a reflection of the light Jehovah.

Hexagram – Interlocking Triangles

This can also be compared to [Robert Fludd's illustration of the universe as two triangles](#), with the created universe being a reflection of the spiritual trinity. Fludd uses triangles specifically as a reference to the trinity, but the hexagram – two interlocking triangles, as used here – well predates Christianity.

Polarity

Levi's own description emphasizes the 19th-century occult view stressing the interaction of opposites in the universe. Besides the duality of the spiritual and physical worlds, there is also the idea of there being two sides to Jehovah himself: the merciful and the vengeful, the light and the dark. This is not the same as good and evil, but the fact is if Jehovah is the creator of the entire world, is omnipresent and omnipotent, then it stands to reason he responsible for both good and bad outcomes. Good harvests and earthquakes were both created by the same god.

05 Theodoros Pelecanos's Ouroboros

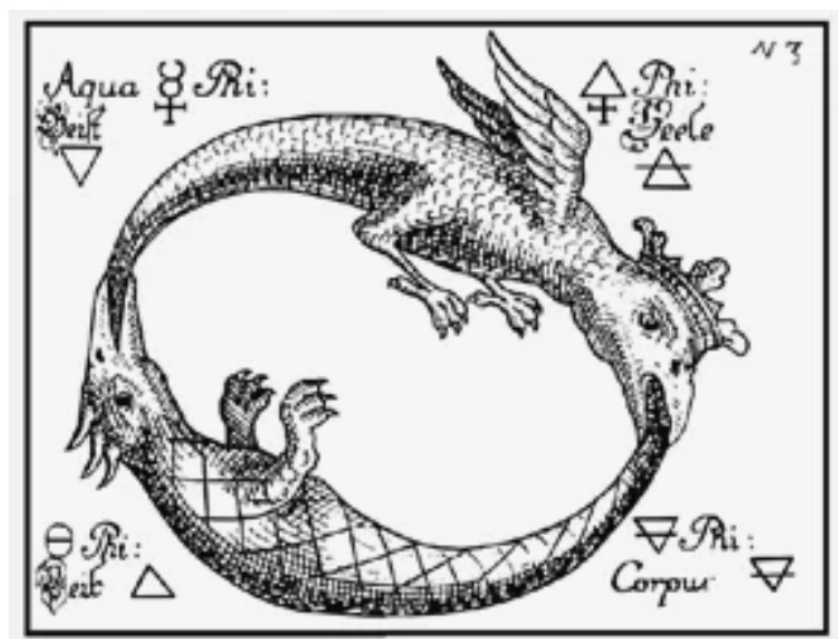
of 08



From the *Synsios*. Theodoros Pelecanos, 1478

This example of the ouroboros image was created by Theodoros Pelecanos in 1478. It was printed in an alchemical tract entitled the *Synsios*.

Read more: Information on the Ouroboros Throughout History



from *Uraltes Chymisches Werck* or the *Book of Abraham the Jew*. *Uraltes Chymisches Werk von Abraham Eleazar*, 18th century

This image appears in a book titled *Uraltes Chymisches Werck von Abraham Eleazar*, or the *Age Old Chemical Work of Abraham Eleazar*. It is also known as the *Book of Abraham the Jew*. It was published in the 18th century but claimed to be a copy of a much older document. The real author of the book is unknown.

The Two Creatures

This image depicts an ouroboros formed from two creatures rather than the more well-known image of a single creature eating its own tail. The top creature is winged and wears a crown. The lower creature is much simpler. This likely represents opposing forces coming together to create a united whole. The two forces here may be higher, spiritual and intellectual forces versus lower, more primal and physical forces.

The Corner Symbols

Each corner of the illustration is dedicated to one of the four physical elements (indicated by various triangles) and various associations.

Upper left – "Aqua," meaning water, and the alchemical symbols of water and mercury. It also says "Spirit."

Top right – Symbols of air and sulfur, plus "Soul."

Bottom left – Symbols for fire and salt, plus "Lieb," meaning body or belly.

Bottom right – Symbols for earth shown twice, plus "Corpus," meaning body.

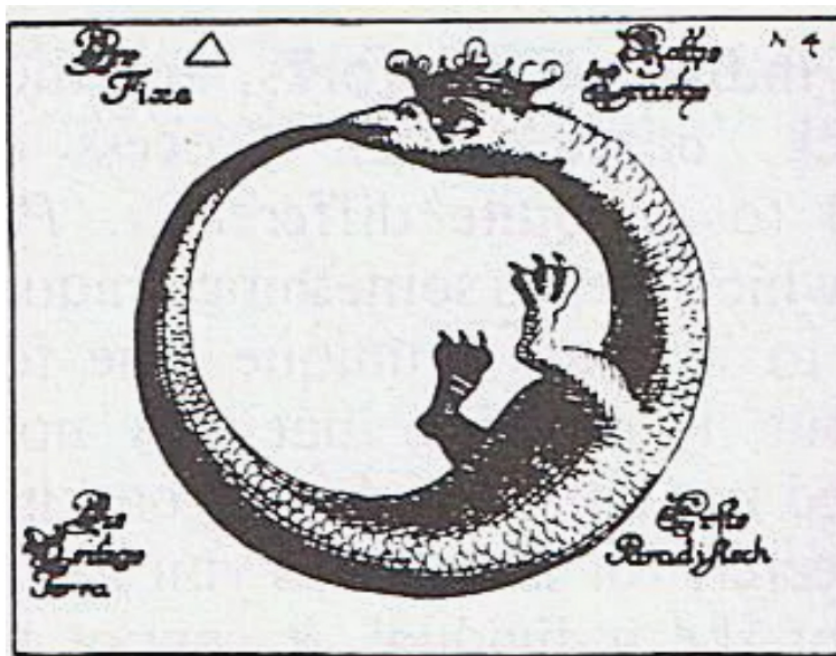
Meaning of the Symbols

Water, air, fire, and earth are the four platonic elements of the ancient world. Mercury, sulfur, and salt are the three primary alchemical elements.

In the three-realm view of the universe, the microcosm can be divided into spirit, soul, and body.

07
of 08

Image of Single Ouroboros by Abraham Eleazar



Uraltes Chymisches Werck von Abraham Eleazar, 18th century

This image also appears in a book titled *Uraltes Chymisches Werck von Abraham Eleazar*, or the *Age Old Chemical Work of Abraham Eleazar*.

The figure in the center is an ouroboros.

According to Adam McLean, "the fixed fire" is in the upper left, "the Holy Earth" at the bottom left and "First Paradise" at the bottom right. He does not comment on the notes in the upper right.

08
of 08

Double Ouroboros Image with Background



From Abraham Eleazar. Uraltes Chymisches Werck von Abraham Eleazar, 18th Century

This image appears in a book titled *Uraltes Chymisches Werck von Abraham Eleazar*, or the *Age Old Chemical Work of Abraham Eleazar*. It is also known as the *Book of Abraham the Jew*. It was published in the 18th century but claimed to be a copy of a much older document. The real author of the book is unknown.

This image is very similar to another ouroboros image in the same volume. The top creatures are

identical, while the lower creatures are similar: here the lower creature has no legs.

This image also provides a background dominated by a barren tree but also featuring a flower in bloom.

What Do You Think?



Which of the following best describes your current occupation as a healthcare provider?

- ☐ Physician
- ☐ Other Practice Administrative Staff
- ☐ I do not work in a healthcare provider setting
- ☐ Health System or Hospital Leadership (Director, VP of Finance, Managed Care, etc.)
- ☐ Practice or Clinic Manager
- ☐ Nurse (RN, LPN) or Medical Assistant
- ☐ Nurse Practitioner or Physician Assistant
- ☐ Billing Manager or Billing/Accounts Receivables Specialist

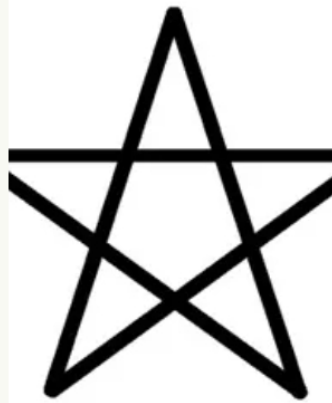
NEXT



Deciphering Eliphas Levi's Baphomet: The Goat of Mendes



The Hexagram's Use in Religion



Pentagrams Meaning



Egyptian Symbol Gallery



Occult Symbols



As Above So Below Occult Phrase and Origin



Geometric Shapes and Their Symbolic Meanings



Marriage of the Red King and White Queen in Alchemy



Logo of Science of Mind



Exploring the Different Branches of Satanism



Faravahar, the Winged Symbol of Zoroastrianism



Naw-Ruz – the Baha'i and Zoroastrian New Year



The Five Element Symbols of Fire, Water, Air, Earth, Spirit



The God of Wealth and Other Deities of Prosperity and Money



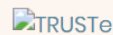
Vodoun Symbols for Their Gods



What Is Mysticism? Definition and Examples

Learn Religions

Follow Us



East Asian

Abrahamic/Middle East

Indian

Other Beliefs & Religions

About Us

Careers

Editorial Guidelines

Terms of Use

Advertise

Privacy Policy

Contact

Do Not Sell My Personal Information



LearnReligions is part of the [Dotdash Meredith](#) publishing family.

